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## DOMESTIC POLITICS IN PAKISTAN: A CURRENT ASSESSMENT

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Pakistan's strategic importance to the United States and the West has been underlined in recent months by the commitment of several forms of economic support to the Zia ul-Haq regime from a variety of western sources.<sup>1</sup> The example of the Shah of Iran, however, should serve as a reminder that strategic importance and acceptance of western aid are not necessarily guarantees of long-term stability. The Pakistani case is further complicated by the lack of clarity concerning the legitimacy, or even the intentions, of the present military regime. General Zia, even after four years in control, continues to assert that military rule is only a temporary, transitional phenomenon, but his is unable to say when the temporary will end or what will emerge from the transition. Still further questions arise concerning the role of Islam within Pakistan's present and future political arrangements. It is therefore helpful to attempt an assessment of the internal stability of the present regime and to speculate on the possible directions in which it might evolve.

In an article written shortly after the July 5, 1977, military coup, I argued that Zia and his fellow generals did apparently intend to return power to civilian hands after their ninety-day "Operation Fairplay" culminated in elections. However, two developments ultimately changed these plans. First, the unanticipated intractability and popular support of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became an increasingly obvious threat to the military and eventually led to the first cancellation of elections. Secondly, other priorities rose in importance and supplanted the holding of elections as the major tasks of the military regime. These included (1) the elimination of Bhutto and his political machine (pursued under the aegis of "accountability"); (2) Islamization;

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and (3) economic reforms and development.<sup>2</sup>

The "accountability" process was largely completed with Bhutto's execution in April 1979. Islamization and economic development remain prominent priorities. The holding of elections has continued to be a nagging obligation, not only because of Zia's oft-repeated promises in this regard, but also because the legitimacy of the present martial law, according to a Supreme Court ruling in November 1977, rests upon the fulfillment of that obligation. As noted below, one of the intended functions of the Provisional Constitution Order of March 24 was the elimination of this question. However, the military have not yet been able to hold such elections because of their anticipation of adverse results. Consequently, the regime has cast about for alternative ways to "civilianize" the government without allowing power to pass to the late Prime Minister's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) or to other "unacceptable" hands.

In an earlier assessment of Pakistani political prospects, I explored six alternative scenarios:

1. Restoration of Parliamentary Democracy
2. Transition to a Basic-Democracy Type of Polity
3. Transition to an Islamic Type of Polity
4. Another Military Coup
5. Mass Protest
6. Persistence of the Status Quo<sup>3</sup>

Although the prognosis made at that time--that the persistence of the status quo was the most likely scenario--remains generally valid today, it will be helpful to review events of the last six months or so within the context of these six general possibilities.

#### 1. Restoration of Parliamentary Democracy

Although General Zia continues to promise elections, he usually does so now with qualifications, such as "under an Islamic system"<sup>4</sup> or "when conditions permit." The issuing in March of the Provisional Constitution Order and the accompanying creation of a Federal Council (Majlis-e-Shura) of around 300 members

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give little encouragement to those who seek the restoration of the parliamentary system described in the 1973 Constitution. Rather, the intended function of the new Constitution Order appears to have been to thwart judicial questioning of martial law activities and to eliminate, through a form of legal alchemy, the lingering question of the present regime's legitimacy in the absence of elections. The Majlis, not yet appointed, appears more as a substitute for popular representation, rather than as a means toward it.

Fair elections appear as improbable today as in October 1977 or November 1979, for the same reasons which forced the cancellation of those earlier attempts at repolling: the political parties which command the greatest popular support are inimical and unacceptable to the military regime, while those acceptable to the regime represent only a minority of public sentiment.

This does not mean that there might not be some association of one or more now-defunct political parties with the military regime.<sup>5</sup> The Pagaro Muslim League and the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Pakistan recently announced their alliance with one another and their willingness to collaborate with the military regime. This is not likely to lead to any democratization of the polity.

## 2. A Basic-Democracy Type of Polity

The local-bodies institutions, created in 1979, and reminiscent of Ayub Khan's Basic Democracies System, have continued to operate, although their scope for political activity and even for independent judgement is severely limited. In February, a new code of conduct was issued for local bodies officials, including the reminder that they not engage in political activities or criticism of the military authorities. Although Zia has previously indicated that local officials will not be utilized as an electoral college for higher offices, as was done under Ayub, it is my impression that members of the provincial councils (surrogates for provincial legislative assemblies) have largely been recruited from among the more loyal local bodies officials.

### 3. Islamic Polity

Islamization has been a continuing priority of the present martial law regime. As I have indicated elsewhere, this current emphasis on Islam rests not only on the historical circumstances surrounding the creation of Pakistan in 1947, but also upon a complex set of political, social, and cultural factors.<sup>6</sup> These include (1) the national "identity crisis" following the loss of East Pakistan in 1971; (2) Bhutto's manipulation of Islamic symbols for political purposes; (3) the PNA's use of Islam as a powerful slogan in the elections and demonstrations of 1977; (4) class factors including disillusionment over socialism and the mobilization of a more fundamentalist middle class; and (5) external factors, such as the increased political and economic roles of other Muslim countries in the Middle East.

The present regime has instituted Islamic reforms in several important areas, including: criminal law; electoral law; the introduction of Islamic courts; and economic reforms.<sup>7</sup> The major recent developments have been the implementation of interest-free banking as an optional arrangement for depositors.

Islam continues to be used as a major symbol in support of the regime and Zia's designation of the new Federal Council as Majlis-e-Shura at least creates some of the form, if not the substance, of what he and others have sketched as an Islamic polity.

As Zia and others have frequently noted, an important function of both the local government activity and the Islamic representation is to "associate the public with the government," i.e., cooptation. Yet there has been no indication that Zia has any intention of sharing real power with either of these groups--or whether others in the military and bureaucratic establishment would permit such a move even if it were contemplated.

Nonetheless, the relative current strength of the Zia regime, the ease

with which it introduced the new constitution order, and the current disarray of the political opposition (which a year ago seemed to be something of an impediment to the realization of these two scenarios) all suggest that there will continue to be an evolution of political institutions under martial law which feature both indirect (and ineffective) representation and Islamic forms. It would not be unthinkable, for instance, for General Zia to transform his title of President into that of Amir.

#### 4. Military Coup

An action from within the military hierarchy to supplant Zia is always a possibility, as recent events in Bangladesh testify. However, the probability of Zia being forced out or eliminated by his colleagues seems much lower today than at any time since he came to power. Following a shake-up of the military in March, 1980, including the forced retirement of some of the more ambitious generals, the CMLA has presumably been more alert to this danger. More importantly, the string of economic and diplomatic successes enjoyed by the present regime, including particularly the prospect of arms aid from the United States, should serve to minimize any threat to Zia from within the military.

#### 5. Mass Protest

During the first quarter of 1981, there appeared to be several indications that a protest movement might develop against the repressiveness and unrepresentativeness of military rule. Demonstrations and incidents of violence led to the closing of several universities; a bomb exploded at the visit of Pope John Paul II to Karachi, and a PIA DC-10 mysteriously burned at the Karachi airport. On another level, representatives of nine "defunct" political parties (including Nusrat Bhutto of the PPP and leaders of several of the erstwhile PNA component parties) met in Lahore in February and formed an alliance called the Movement to Restore Democracy (MRD). About the same time,

the Baluchistan High Court was challenging actions of Martial Law authorities and threatening to reopen the issue of the regime's legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> Although evidence of more general public sentiment is difficult to gauge by any reading of the censored (and self-censored) press, there were also indications of a more general public discontent.

Then, early in March came the widely-publicized hijacking of the PIA Boeing jet. It later became clear that Murtaza Bhutto, son of the late Prime Minister, and his clandestine organization al-Zulfikar were responsible for the hijacking, and that they had been aided in their endeavor by the Soviets and Afghans in Kabul. The political fallout from this event seriously undercut the opposition movement within Pakistan. Although there is no evidence that Nusrat Bhutto or her daughter Benazir, had any advance warning of the hijacking, they suffered some degree of isolation within the opposition. Some other members of the MRD condemned the PPP and the terrorist act in the same statements and the government utilized the political capital it gained from the successful negotiation of the release of the hostages to crack down and create further fragmentation among the opposition.

Viewed in the light of these developments, the issuance of the Provisional Constitution Order on March 24 and the forced resignation and dismissal of several Supreme Court and High Court Judges on March 25 were actions made necessary by the judicial threat in Baluchistan and made possible by the regime's reinforced position in the wake of the hijacking.

Although disaffection from the regime is presumably still strong in several quarters, the likelihood of a successful protest movement against the martial law regime in the near future appears to be rather low. The fragmentation of opposition leadership, the weakness of public support, and the relative prosperity of the country (bolstered by remittances from overseas Pakistanis and a plethora of aid packages) would all seem to militate against this scenario, at

least in the short run.

One other form of violent social conflict should be mentioned at this point. Regionalism has been a persistent feature of Pakistani politics for decades. Since the 1971 war there have been recurrent problems of regionalism in all three of the minority provinces (NWFP, Baluchistan, and Sind), including what amounted to civil war in Baluchistan in 1973-1977.

Some commentators, most notably Selig Harrison, suggest that a renewal and intensification of this type of conflict is a likely scenario.<sup>9</sup> While the influx of Afghan refugees into NWFP and Baluchistan appears to be increasing tensions in both provinces, I have seen no indications of any imminent eruption of such discontent into violent protest against the regime.

#### 6. Persistence of the Status Quo

General Zia appears today to be more firmly in control than at any point in the past. His position has been bolstered, at least in the short run, by the immediacy of the Afghan challenge, the performance of the economy, and the implicit endorsement inherent in massive doses of foreign aid.

The most likely scenario for the foreseeable future, therefore, would seem to be more of the same, with gradual incorporation of elements of scenarios two and three (Basic Democracies and Islamic Polity) into an arrangement in which the military still remains in charge. General Zia continues to refer to the present arrangements as tentative and provisional but they appear likely to persist into the indefinite future.

In the longer-term, however, we might expect public protest to resume, since anticipated arrangements appear unlikely to give adequate scope for popular representation. In that eventuality, United States support, however great a short-run asset, may become a long-term liability. Despite the great pains General Zia and Foreign Minister Agha Shahi have taken to assure their countrymen that American military aid will not compromise Pakistan's sovereignty and

principles, American patronage may nonetheless serve as a potent symbol against the regime. Should this occur, the relationship will also be a liability for the United States, as we find ourselves cast in the role of sponsor for the repressive actions of an unpopular dictator.

Much of what happens in Pakistan's domestic politics depends upon economic, diplomatic, or military factors. As long as Zia's stock remains high in these areas, and as long as he continues to cover his military, judicial, and agitational flanks, his position appears relatively safe. Any major setbacks, however, may set the stage for less orderly forms of change.



#### REFERENCES

1. In addition to the American decision to resume aid to Pakistan, the Aid-Pakistan Consortium, the World Bank, and the Japanese have all made major commitments in the last six months. In addition, the United States and others have agreed to reschedule or write off earlier Pakistani debts.
2. "Persistent Praetorianism: Pakistan's Third Military Regime," Pacific Affairs, 51:3 (Fall 1978), 406-426.
3. These are incorporated in "Prospects for Political Freedom in Pakistan," paper presented at a Conference on Supporting Freedom in Muslim Central Asia, Freedom House, New York, NY, November 14-15, 1980.
4. Dawn Overseas Weekly, March 28, 1981, p. 3.
5. Parties were formally outlawed in late 1979 when the November elections were cancelled, yet they have continued to operate in a limited capacity.
6. See "The Political Dynamics of Islamic Resurgence in Pakistan," Asian Survey, 19:6 (June 1979), 547-557.
7. These are described in greater detail in my essay on "The New Islamic Order in Pakistan," scheduled to be published in a book edited by Mohammad Ayoob.
8. See Lawrence Lifschultz, "A Fundamental Debate," Far Eastern Economic Review, 111:12 (March 13, 1981), pp. 21-22.
9. See Selig S. Harrison, In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Superpower Rivalry, scheduled for publication in 1981.